

CHAPTER 2

Ebonics: A Case History

ERNIE SMITH

ERNIE SMITH, now a renowned linguist and powerful public orator, tells the story of his life through the story of his language. From his first experience with school, his language was labeled deficient. School authorities placed him first in remedial courses and then, finally, at a vocational school where he wouldn't need to learn "sophisticated" speech. After graduating, Smith hit the streets. It was out there that he received his most extensive education in language, learning how to seamlessly switch back and forth between Ebonics, the language of the "unlearned Southern Black," and Standard English. Eventually, Smith was inspired to return to school, and he went on to become the speaker he is today. His story is one in which linguistic competence, through all its incarnations, has been the shaping force of his life. Only when "Standard English" was modeled by those whose ideas called for the political liberation of African Americans, did the standard become acceptable to him as a language choice.

I have spoken Ebonics—or, as it has also been referred to, Black English—since I was a child. Because my parents and playmates, the primary teachers of speech and language, spoke Ebonics, it was the language I acquired.

It was not until much later, however, that I discovered there was a drastic difference between the language I had acquired and used extensively in my home environment, and the language I was expected to use away from home, especially in the classroom. In 1948 my family moved to South Central Los Angeles, where I attended a predominantly Black grade school. At this particular elementary school, I was confronted with the fact that my language was different and that this difference was perceived as a "deficiency" that needed to be corrected. There was a gross mismatch between my informal, everyday language style and the formal school talk required by teachers.

Teachers and other school officials often used such terms as "talking flat," "sloven speech," "corrupt speech," "broken English," "verbal cripple," "verbally destitute," "linguistically handicapped," and "linguistically deprived" to describe the language behavior of my Black classmates and me. They suggested that our language differences were deficiencies that were related to physical and/or mental abnormalities. Often during Parent-Teacher Conferences or at Open House Conferences, my teachers were not hesitant to suggest to my parents, and to parents of other children,

that we should be assigned to the school speech clinic for speech therapy or to the school psychologist for a diagnostic examination, and treatment for possible congenital mental disorders.

Because I had been labeled a verbal cripple by my teachers in elementary school, my language differences at Junior High were, from the "G-G" (Git Go),¹ the basis for my having been assigned to remediation language classes and special sections of most of my other academic courses. The stigma of having been assigned to the "bonehead" sections of my courses created for me, as well as for other children assigned to those sections, a situation whereby we became the object of mockery and gibes from our other schoolmates. Not infrequently the "signifying" and "hoorahin" of our other agemates would lead to "woofin"² sessions or fist fights, which was behavior that teachers and administrators considered totally reprehensible and intolerable. By the time I reached the ninth grade at Edison, I was labeled "anti-social" and described as "acting out." Thus, as had been the case throughout my elementary school years, during my junior high school years, it was always my language competence or behavior that precipitated my negative experiences.

In 1954 I began my first semester at John C. Fremont High School in South Central Los Angeles. At Fremont my language difficulties were again the basis for my assignment to special sections of almost all of my courses; and again the stigma of having been assigned to these remedial courses created situations where those of us who were in these special courses became the brunt of the jokes and teasing gibes of our other schoolmates. Eventually, disruptive language became the grounds for my having been suspended from Fremont High and assigned to an all-boys normal school called Jacob A. Riis.

Jacob A. Riis was a quasi vocational-education, behavior-management institution, where disruptive males who could not adjust to the requisites of a co-educational environment were isolated for rehabilitation or behavior modification. When I was initially admitted to Riis, I was administered a series of vocational aptitude tests which, according to my counselors, indicated that I

had a very low comprehension of the English language. As with most children who failed or scored low in English Comprehension on these tests, I was urged by the counselors at Riis to only aspire to fields or occupations that were in the vocational trades or industrial arts. Having been tracked into dull and uninteresting shop courses at Riis, I became totally bored and turned off with school. And although I was verbally encouraged by my teachers because of my "high potential," I was labeled as "incorrigible." After doing a "yard"³ at Riis, I returned to John C. Fremont and graduated in the Winter Class of 1957. Because most of my encounters with the urban school system were, in the main, very negative, I had no aspirations or intentions whatsoever of pursuing a post-secondary education.

Probably because most of my early adolescent encounters with professionals, Black and White, had been with those I had encountered as authority figures, I developed an intense mistrust and dislike for professionals, especially "boozie"⁴ Blacks. Paradoxically, my mistrust of bourgeois Black professionals was due to their annoying language behavior. Because Black professionals were always "talking proper"⁵ and seemingly "puttin' on airs," they appeared superficial, insincere, and phoney. Furthermore, because the vast majority of the Black professionals resided in areas out of the Black ghetto, there were few if any professionals in occupations such as doctors, dentists, attorneys, pharmacists, and engineers, etc., with whom I could identify. The absence of role models who were Black professionals, coupled with my negative encounters and reactions to authority figures in general, such as my teachers, truant, juvenile, and probation officers, etc., precipitated a reaction which ultimately was the basis for my belief that formal education was irrelevant, and that I could make it in the streets, "ridin' n' leavin', stylin' n' schemin', and talkin' out the side of my mouth"; "tryin' on clothes, pimpin' whoes, and slammin' Eldorado does."⁶

In the streets, however, it was again my linguistic competence that became pivotal to my survival. My first street hustle or game was what is called "stuff playin."⁷ I was a "slum hustler," i.e., selling inexpensive watches, rings, perfume, and costume jewelry

outside of banks and on supermarket parking lots. To become a proficient "con man" or "stuff player," I needed to develop a fluent and proficient use of the speech characteristics and phonology of the unlearned Southern Black. This is often called "jeffin," or "game whoopin."⁸ Primarily because most urbanized Blacks as well as Whites associate language usage and speech forms with intelligence, and because they attribute the lowest level of intelligence to speakers and users of the "deep south" variety of Ebonics, this bias or predisposition towards the user of Southern Ebonics made them easy "marks,"⁹ for stuff players and game whoopers.

In order to complete a transaction as a slum hustler, there is a strong reliance on two variables: 1) the mark or victim had to have the above-mentioned sociolinguistic bias or ignorance; and 2) he must have some latent drive for "gettin over."¹⁰ Since Ebonics, especially Southern Ebonics, has been prejudicially embedded into the minds of many people as an index of intelligence, most slum hustlers know that by eyerolling, head scratching, grinning, and shuffling, and by skilfully code switching into the language and speech forms that are stereotyped as characteristic of unlearned and illiterate Southern Blacks, they can induce a mark into paying considerably more than their actual value—for relatively inexpensive watches and rings, for example.

While slum hustling is a cunning and manipulative ruse, it does not fall within that category of confidence schemes and swindles that are legally defined as theft, bunco, or fraud, and hence, slum hustling was not a legally precarious hustle. However, because of ten outraged tricks or "marks" resort to the use of physical violence to get their money back when they have discovered that the merchandise wasn't genuine, slum hustling was indeed precarious in other ways. Needless to say, these kinds of negative encounters created, for me, circumstances which eventually required that I suspend operations and divert my entrepreneurial talents into other fields. In my Aunt Bert's vernacular, I had to "Root hog or die po'."¹¹

Sweet Mouthin', Rappin' and Mackin'

In 1959 I began to diversify my hustling talents into other fields, and ironically, it was again my linguistic competence that was essential to my success and survival. I had, since my early teens, always admired and aspired to become a mellow fellow, player, and a "macaroni,"¹² and while in the neighborhood where I lived there were no professionals to serve as role models, there were numerous bookmakers, gamblers, hustlers, pimps, gangsters, and players.

Walter N., a fellow who I considered to be a top-notch player and a mack, first taught me the pimping game. Schoolboy, which was Walter's monica or nickname¹³ in the fast life,¹⁴ taught me all of the psycholinguistics of pimpin' and pandering, as well as the sociolinguistics of survival within and outside the street culture. He especially emphasized the necessity of my developing an ability to linguistically code switch into "proper English." Unlike stuff playin', and slum hustling, which are hustles that required a proficient and skillful use of linguistic, paralinguistic, and semantic cues conveying an ignorant personality, sweetmouthin', rappin', and especially mackin' required a complete reversal in roles. Schoolboy not only taught me the nuances of the fast life, he urged that I pursue a post-secondary education. In fact, at his insistence, in 1959 I enrolled in Los Angeles Metropolitan College of Business. Because I had scored low in the College English Examination Board Test, I had to enroll in what we called at that time "dumb-bell" English courses, and once again I found my success and survival pivoting and hinging on my language behavior and linguistic competence. In 1962, while still a student, I joined the Nation of Islam, commonly known as the Black Muslims. There were a number of factors that motivated my becoming a member of the Nation of Islam: their promulgation of Black pride, Black dignity, Black self-respect, Black self-help, Black self-improvement, and the like, but above all it was the linguistic proficiency and forensic style of the minister of Mosque #27, Brother John Shabazz. I was so over-

whelmed by the eloquent oratorical style of Minister Malcolm X of Mosque #7 in New York, that I was convinced that I would not lose any masculinity or Blackness by learning to speak Standard Oral English.

I had originally been taking a junior college transfer course at L.A. Metropolitan because I wanted to become a Muslim Minister. I was encouraged by Minister John to enroll in some public speaking or theater arts, drama, voice and diction, or communication skills classes, which would help build my confidence and develop my own debating and oratorical style. During this period, I became known as a community activist and militant Black Nationalist. I was very much involved in campus and community politics, including the Free Speech Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Debates, and the Watts Riots.

In June of 1962 I graduated from L.A. Metropolitan College and received my Associate in Arts Degree. In September of 1962, I transferred to Los Angeles State College and began a double major in Speech and Fine Arts. While enrolled at Cal State Los Angeles, I became a member of the Forensics Squad and embarked on what was to become a quasi-professional career in public address and speech making.

In 1967 I graduated from Cal State and received my Bachelor of Arts Degree. In August of 1967, I began a career in the mass communications media, working at KTTV Television Studios, in Hollywood, as an Associate Producer of a conversation-type talk show, called *The Joe Pyne Show*. I had appeared often on that show prior to 1967 as a guest discussing controversial issues. Trained and seasoned in the nuances of debate and public speaking, and having thus become an associate producer on a TV talk show, language communications and rhetoric played a central role in my life throughout the 1960s, and indeed it was again my language competence, especially my forensic proficiency that was responsible for my success and achievement.

Before 1968, the central influence that language had in my life was occasioned by social conditions and economic circumstances. However, during and after 1968, literacy skills and linguistic com-

petence became one of my conscious concerns. This concern was first aroused by the astonishing number of young high school dropouts and often high school graduates I was encountering in South Central Los Angeles who were unable to read or write. I began conducting reading classes for the Brothers in the community who wanted so much to learn how to read. Because I had no background in teaching or education, all of the methods, techniques, and devices I had used in my attempts to teach reading skills to these brothers failed. This created in me intense feelings of dismay, frustration, and failure, feelings that led me into a sequence of dys-social behaviors that I have not to this day been able to completely understand.

I formed a community group called the United Front Against Imperialism. As the Minister of Education of this organization, I was responsible for the creation of relevant reading materials and the development of a valid teaching technique to "educate the masses." The United Front was a Maoist-oriented organization through which I was going to strike a mortal blow to the decadent and oppressive imperialist, capitalist system. I never did.

So I enrolled in the Graduate Program in Comparative Culture in January of 1970. When I enrolled I had not defined any areas of special interest or concentration. I had a little background in drama, speech, and fine arts, and Dr. White, my advisor, was a child-psychologist. Recalling that I had expressed to him a concern with the problem of illiteracy in the ghetto, and the problem of reading in the urban schools, Dr. White suggested that during my first quarter, I should just "rock steady"¹⁵ and enroll in a few courses in linguistics and social sciences. Little did I know then that shortly thereafter again my language and linguistic behavior would provide the basis for what was to become three years of relentless investigation and research for a thesis and doctoral dissertation.

In May of 1970, following the public announcement that the United States had extended the Vietnam War into Cambodia, and during the midst of a nation-wide campus strike denouncing the National Guard shooting of campus activists on the Kent State

University Campus in Ohio, I was asked to give an antiwar speech in support of the Irvine Student Strike!

During my speech I occasionally used the parlance and jargon which was for me the most graphic, illustrative, and succinct idiom to describe my feelings regarding capitalism and the imperialistic oppression, repression, depression, suppression, and compression of the Afro, Asian, and Latin American peoples. Needless to say, the students "dug"¹⁶ on the speech and indicated during and after the speech that they felt it was "Right On!" However, two days following the speech, I was indicted by the Orange County district attorney's office and charged with a violation of Section 415.5, California O.C., to wit the willful and unlawful and malicious disturbance of the peace by using what was described in the complaint as "vulgar, profane, and indecent" language within the presence or hearing of women or children, in a loud and boisterous manner. I was, to say the least, astonished at this spurious allegation, for surely I had said nothing in that speech that I considered or had intended to be indecent, vulgar, or profane. The charges against me had been filed by the Campus Chief of Police at the behest of one of the campus's more conservative administrators, Vice-Chancellor L.E., in behalf of two elderly women who were secretaries in his office.

It had always been my view that there was no such thing as a bad word. There were words that annoyed people. In the environment in which I was reared, it wasn't what you said, it was the way you said it that communicated your intent. Thus for me, as I imagine for most Blacks, words in and of themselves have a low priority. For those who speak Ebonics, the context of the situation as well as other cues and patterns of communication, such as intonation, gestures, stress, and pitch are just as important in communicating a given idea as the lexical items. Nevertheless, there I was a verbal cripple, ghetto child of the urban schools who supposedly was "never going to amount to nothing," a Graduate Student in residence in one of the major universities in the Western Hemisphere, and once again my language behavior was perceived as a corrupt and deviant vernacular which needed to be corrected.

Only this time, my language had been labeled as vulgar, indecent, and profane.

Dr. Mary Key

This, then, was the hill that I would fight on. I had always at a gut level regarded the manner in which I spoke and communicated as a valid and legitimate idiom, but because of the repeated negative reinforcement throughout my rearing cycle, and because I didn't have the sufficient technical background of knowledge to refute those who argued otherwise, it was always difficult for me to advance my position without being made to appear foolish.

Dr. Mary Key, who was at the time the acting chairperson of the Program in Linguistics at UCI, gave me the technical skills and methodological approaches that enabled me to steadfastly and confidently approach my investigation and examination into the historical development and the sociolinguistic nuances of Ebonics. I had been informed that Dr. Key was currently involved in some independent research of her own into various aspects, features, and sociolinguistic nuances of Ebonics. Because of Dr. Key's expert knowledge of linguistics and social dialects, especially Ebonics, I beseeched her to testify in my behalf at my free speech Trial. Dr. Key obligingly testified in my behalf; and I am certain that if there is one single factor which ultimately led to my acquittal in that matter, it was the enlightened, and objective testimony of Dr. Mary Key.

I am now working as an educator in the University of California system, where I hope to reach both black students and white students in the educational system and inform them of the problems faced by black people in this country and about the validity of talking about a black experience and a black language in society like ours.

NOTES

1. "*G-G*" (*Git Go*) is a term which means "from the start or the beginning." SYN: "the jump," or "jump street."
2. *Signifying*: to reproach with scornful or sarcastic language; to jeer, or mock; to taunt with meddlesome, irksome comments, annoying gibes. *Hoorahin*: to drive or provoke a person; goading. *Wooftin*: to bluff or threaten in a verbal exchange; verbal combat
3. A *yard* is the term used to designate the amount of time served in confinement or as punishment in juvenile hall, Youth Authority, or jail. (Usually refers to a year, but often nine months, or 3/4 year.)
4. *Booize*—*Booiz-wa-zee* (Bourgeoisie). This term is used to refer to the middle- and upper-income Blacks who display character traits of Whites; also used to refer to low-income Blacks who exhibit a very obsequious demeanor.
5. *Talkin proper*: 1) a pretentious use of Anglo speech forms; 2) the ability to mimic with mastery the phonological, grammatical, and semantic cues of Standard English; 3) a hypercorrect attempt to speak Standard English, characterized by excessive malaprops, paragogics, reglanced verbs, R sounds in the middle of words, and the adding of R to words ending in A.
6. The phrase, "Ridin 'n' leavin', stylin 'n' schemin, and talkin out the side of my mouth," refers to the manner in which Black pimps and players drive their automobiles (usually Cadillac Eldorados) when they are out in the evenings hustling and socializing. In the parlance of the street culture, the phrase, "tryin on clothes, pimpin whos, and slammn Eldorado does," expresses the ultimate of attainment in their lifestyle.
7. *Stuff playin*: a verbal trick and device; a cunning, manipulative ruse used by con artists and swindlers to deceive a person for monetary gain. Stuff, i.e., worthless merchandise or nothing at all, is given in exchange for money. *Stuff player*: one who plays stuff games. *Slum*: costume jewelry, inexpensive rings, or watches that bear brand names which appear genuine.
8. *Jeffin*: the simultaneous shuffling, head scratching, rolling of one's eyes and grinning (especially in the presence of whites) to put ole massa on. *Game whoopin*: to run a game or swindle someone; to whip (whoop), meaning beat or cheat. Verbal trick or device.
9. *Mark*: an expression used by hustlers when referring to a person who is easily deceived, cheated, outwitted: a victim of a confidence scheme or swindle; the "tricked."
10. *Gettin over*: being successful.
11. *Root hog or die po!* an expression which suggests that as a hog who is hungry will burrow its nose into the ground seeking roots to feed upon, so must a human who has no gainful employment or means of support apply himself to an equally intense effort for subsistence.
12. *Macaroni*: a mack; a very stylish, neat dresser; an English dandy who affected the mannerisms of foreigners. *Mackin*: pimp; gigolo; playboy.
13. *Monica*: a name associated with a person's personality, often considered a bell of notoriety.
14. *Fast life*: the street culture; the lifestyle of hustlers, gamblers, players, etc., so named because one must be ever on guard, alert, and quick of perception.
15. *Rock steady*: stay on position, on balance; to take it easy, to not come unglued, get emotional or excited; start slowly and then build up steam. SYN: Hang on sloop. Hang in there.
16. *Dug (dig on)*: To pay attention; to observe very closely; to approve of or delight in something.